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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1317  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1184  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1753  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2313  
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0755  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000334

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SENSITIVE  
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STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BERDIMUHAMEDOV BONDS WITH KARIMOV  
DURING OFFICIAL VISIT TO TASHKENT

REF: 07 ASHGABAT 1159

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: According to official press reports, President Berdimuhamedov's official visit to Uzbekistan was a foreign policy success, during which he established a positive working relationship with President Karimov. The two sides agreed on the need to intensify bilateral trade and the general economic relationship. During the visit, the presidents signed agreements designed to help the two countries communicate better and improve their trade figures, but there was little indication that they had made progress on other issues, like simplified visa regimes or cooperative water management. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (U) President Berdimuhamedov arrived in Tashkent March 10 for a two-day official visit. Although there was the usual pomp, circumstance, and wreath-laying which accompany official presidential visits, there was an air of purpose as well. The meetings that occurred during the visit appear to have been more substantive than those which took place when President Karimov visited Ashgabat in October 2007 (reftel). The two presidents signed a series of agreements designed to enhance the bilateral relationship, particularly in the economic sphere:

-- Several intergovernmental agreements on cooperation in the agriculture sector, including Turkmenistan's purchase of Uzbek-manufactured agriculture equipment and industrial products needed for agriculture, and a possible exchange of agricultural specialists;

-- An agreement on the repair and restoration of facilities located in joint border areas;

-- A protocol agreement between the foreign ministries that is to facilitate inter-governmental communications; and

-- A protocol to advance a bilateral economic cooperation

agreement that the two presidents signed during Karimov's October 2007 trip to Turkmenistan.

¶4. (U) The Turkmen media reported substantive discussions focused on increasing cooperation in energy, trade and economy, agriculture, transportation and communications infrastructure development, as well as water management. In their statements, however, neither president commented on the Caspian littoral pipeline project, which Karimov publicly promoted during his visit to Ashgabat or on the proposed refurbishment of the Central Asia-Center (CAC) pipelines. There also was no public mention of Turkmenistan's planned gas pipeline project to China or electricity sales to Tajikistan, both of which require transit cooperation from Uzbekistan.

¶5. (SBU) A positive, collegial relationship appears to be slowly taking shape between the two presidents, and there are other signs that the entire bilateral relationship is warming. The two presidents attended a ceremony to lay a cornerstone for a new Turkmenistan embassy building in Tashkent, and President Karimov bestowed an honorary doctorate in medicine on President Berdimuhamedov. Berdimuhamedov later traveled to Samarkand to tour the SamAuto motor works there. The Uzbeks held an economic exhibition in Ashgabat for the first time in February 2008, which the two countries have decided to make into an annual event. Possibly as a by-product of the exhibit, Uzbekistani officials have proposed a joint venture company to sell and service cars produced in the UzDaewooAuto and SamAuto plants in Turkmenistan. Members of the Turkmen delegation reportedly met with representatives of Uzbekistan's ethnic Turkmen population. (NOTE: It is possible that the

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officials wanted to check on the status of these minorities, but they may have also sought to assess their interest in Turkmen repatriation or citizenship. END NOTE.)

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: While Karimov is the Turkmen president's peer, he is also chronologically older and more senior, Berdimuhamedov appears to be adhering to the Turkmen custom of reverence and respect for elders in the deferential way that he treats him. (NOTE: Berdimuhamedov conferred the honorary title of "respected elder" on Karimov during his Ashgabat visit. END NOTE.) The two presidents appear eager to advance a mutually beneficial bilateral economic relationship. It seems curious to us that no mention was made of strategic energy issues at all, but there may have been some preliminary agreement to focus exclusively on bilateral issues during this visit. END COMMENT.  
HOAGLAND